

THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF ROMAN FREEDMEN PROBING THE RELIGIOUS EVIDENCE¹

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RESUMEN

Aceptando la estrecha relación entre status social y actos religiosos, el autor defiende, sin embargo, la inexistencia de cultos exclusivos de una determinada clase social, a excepción de los cultos estatales, debido a que el sistema religioso romano prestaba mayor atención a la distinción entre religión pública y privada que entre la gradación de las divinidades. Centrándose en la figura del liberto, el autor explica que se trataba de un grupo social que intentaba autoafirmarse como colectivo, separándose de los esclavos, a la vez que debían conquistar un lugar individual en la sociedad. Dos aspectos de la religiosidad de los libertos son discutidos: las asociaciones con la divinidad y los cultos que permiten la promoción social.

ABSTRACT

The author believes the close relationship between social status and religious acts. He subjects, however, the lack of cults for a specific social class, except the official religion, because in the roman religious system distinction between public and private religiosity was more relevant than that between inferior and superior deities. He focuses on freedmen to explain that it was a social group that adopted in their ways of self-representation a double perspective, seeking to segregate themselves of slaves and the other on the community in which they had to conquer a proper. Two subjects are discussed: the relationship with the divine and the upwards cults.

¹ An earlier version of this article was read as a paper at a conference on Ancient Religion organised by the Department of Classics at the University of Reading in July 1998. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support which I received from the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria towards attending the above conference. I would like to thank the organisers of the conference, in particular Gabby Bodard, for providing such an inspiring forum for discussion. I am also indebted to Jane Gardner and Tessa Rajak for the opportunity of discussing my views on freedmen with them. It was originally the intention to present a revised version at the GIREA-conference in Huelva. Due to unforeseen circumstances I, nor the paper, ever made it to Huelva. I am extremely grateful to Prof. Jaime Alvar for encouraging me to submit it to ARYS to be published together with the papers given at the conference.

Between 1957 and 1963 the German scholar Franz Bömer published four volumes of *Untersuchungen über die Religion der Sklaven in Griechenland und Rom* in which he set out to systematically analyse the religious preferences of slaves in the Greco-Roman world². As has been usefully pointed out by Geza Alföldy in his review of the first volume, Bömer's ambitious project appeared at a time when scholarly research was focussing exclusively on forms of official religion maintained by the elite³. Bömer did more than just include for analysis a section of the population which had been ignored up till then, he was sensitive to the fact that the lower-class cults which he studied represented genuine expressions of religiosity. As far as I have been able to ascertain, Bömer was the first to mark out the interface between religion and social background. In one form or another his line of enquiry has been adopted by a number of other scholars. Marxist historians, such as E. M. Shtajerman, have identified certain cults as the property of the oppressed lower classes⁴. Nowadays it has become almost a truism of studies on religion in the ancient world that social considerations were a prime factor in the seeking out of a specific deity. For example, in his study of early Christian communities Wayne Meeks has argued that social factors encouraged women and freedmen to turn to Christianity⁵.

The studies by Bömer and Shtajerman, as well as those by Beaujeu and Petit on the religious preferences of the upper classes⁶, are based on the assumption that in the ancient world religious affiliation was determined by the social background of the worshipper. Given the fact that the Greeks and Romans were overwhelmingly concerned with matters of status, it can hardly be doubted that a connection existed between religious acts and social background. Yet this assumption cannot be credited with absolute validity. It is difficult to detect in the

² The work was originally published in the *Abhandlungen der Wissenschaften und der Literatur (Mainz), Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse*, 1957; 1960; 1961; 1963. The second edition was incorporated in the series *Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei*. Of the projected three volumes only two appeared, volume 1 and 3. In this study I will mainly refer to volume 1 on 'Die wichtigste Kulte und Religionen in Rom und im lateinischen Westen', which was substantially revised by Peter Herz in conjunction with the author. The volume appeared in 1981 in Wiesbaden as Band XIV, 1 of the above-mentioned series.

³ Geza Alföldy in *AAAntHung* 8 (1960), 460-6, esp. 460.

⁴ E. M. Shtajerman, *Die Krise der Sklavenhalterordnung im Westen des römischen Reiches*, ed. and tr. Seyforth, W., Berlin 1964, 60; 63; 66; 221; 238.

⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven and London 1983, 21-2, emphasising the freedman's transitional status and his status dissonance.

⁶ Paul Petit, *Pax Romana*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1976, 227-32; J. Beaujeu, 'La religion de la classe sénatoriale à l'époque des Antonins', in *Hommages à Jean Bayet*, Brussels 1964, 54-75.

Greco-Roman world cults that can be designated as the reserve of the upper classes, with the exception of the state cults, nor did cults exist which were the exclusive property of the lower classes. Even in cults which have been traditionally associated with the lower classes, such as that of the rural god Silvanus, we find the occasional worshipper of high social status⁷. This is to be expected in a religious system where a distinction between public and private religiosity was more relevant than that between inferior and superior deities.

Of more importance to the theme of the present study is the question whether there was a difference in religious preferences between the slave and the free population, including those of freed status. In his study of slavery and religion in the Roman world, which will also be the main focus here, Bömer concluded that the epigraphic evidence does not show major discrepancies between the religious affiliations of slave and free⁸. He tried to solve this conundrum by assuming that freedmen stayed loyal to the creeds that they had adopted as slaves. Bömer's objective was to demonstrate that it is impossible to identify a specific type of 'Sklavenreligion'. However, his argument also has serious implications for the evaluation of freedmen and religion. His argument presupposes that we can reliably trace the religious behaviour of the same individuals in their servile condition and after manumission, which is most often not the case. Thus, Bömer's argument is persuasive as far as the general categories of slave and free are concerned, yet it fails to take into consideration that individuals may benefit from social advancement. By assuming that slaves adopted a preference for a specific cult, for whatever reason (perhaps closely monitored by their masters), and that once freed they indicated no desire to break free from this mould, Bömer effectively ruled out that religion in the Roman world could be used as a means to express separate identities for slaves and freedmen. This study wants to challenge this notion. In the following pages I shall focus on a number of associations between freedmen and the divine world which do suggest that freedmen had strong desires to proclaim a separate identity. Because of the transitory status of the freedman, limited to one generation only, we will see that this separate identity entails complex problems of self-presentation, most famously portrayed in Petronius' *Satyrica*. The forming of an identity was therefore not a sufficient prerequisite for social success and it is often combined with a

⁷ Peter F. Dorsey, *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion*, Leiden 1992, 105-35, esp. 115: 'Without question, the upper class had little interest in Silvanus'. Nevertheless, as Dorsey's discussion reveals, members of the upper classes did sometimes set up dedications to Silvanus: 115, with members of the senatorial order listed in note 55; equestrians in note 56; members of the municipal elite in note 57.

⁸ Bömer (above note 2), 31; 85; 103ff.; 190ff.

forward-looking mentality which is prominently displayed in the religious choices freedmen made. I shall not assume, however, that freedmen formed a homogeneous group in society. Instead I shall argue that the more successful a freedman was in terms of accumulating wealth, the more likely we are to encounter religious behaviour reflecting this success.

In plain language, a freedman is a slave who has been manumitted; the transition was a fundamental one in terms of his legal position. Whereas a slave could not own property, at least not in legal terms, a freedman could. A freedman could conduct a legitimate marriage and the children born of this wedlock would be in his *potestas*, and not become the property of their mother's *dominus*. Although it is by no means implied here that all freedmen could sever their ties from their servile past or would automatically achieve the full complement of privileges belonging to Roman citizenship, this transformation was a significant one⁹. The achievement found expression in iconography and other forms of self-advertisement. In his study of tomb-reliefs of freedmen Paul Zanker emphasised the pride they placed in their domestic and civic achievements: having a lawful wife and legitimate children of freeborn descent made one a respectable citizen and could hold the promise of future social advancement, especially for the next generation¹⁰. Such achievements are illustrated in the wearing of the toga and in the holding of hands. This is of course a highly revealing aspect of freedmen mentality, but it fails to tell the whole story of how freedmen tried to achieve social assimilation. These symbols of citizenship only provide evidence of the first step in the process leading towards integration into the community. In other words, these images tell us a lot about how freedmen wanted to be seen on one level of the register on which respectable citizens were measured, but they do not inform us on possible strategies to become outstanding citizens of their community enabling them to gradually move closer to the status of elite citizens. In fact, one might even argue that because of their preoccupation with domestic matters, this specific category of freedmen was not successful in taking the next step. For in order to become fully respected members of their communities freedmen needed to become actively involved in municipal affairs, and the only means open to them was by providing benefactions of some kind. The reliefs studied by Zanker contain no scenes of benefactions and therefore they represent a category of freedmen who had to be satisfied with the plain trappings of Roman citizenship.

⁹ The best discussion of the problems concerning freedmen and Roman citizenship can be found in Jane F. Gardner, *Being a Roman citizen*, London and New York 1993, 7-52.

¹⁰ P. Zanker, 'Grabreliefs römischer Freigelassener', *JbDAI* 90 (1975), 267-315.

The freedman was a favourite target for social criticism by satirists and historians¹¹, and there is a vast number of literary texts illustrating that in spite of their status as citizens freedmen were still considered to be outsiders. In fact, the main driving force behind its most famous exponent, Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*, is the idea that the status of a freedman is a social cul-de-sac, which leads Trimalchio to seriously misconceive his position in Roman society. In this scenario, a successful freedman can only find satisfaction in a fantasy world in which social rules are incorrectly understood and thus transformed into ridiculous distortions of the prevalent aristocratic mentality. Of course, Petronius addresses a readership composed mainly of social snobs, but at individual points his characterisation may not be too far removed from reality. Freedman thinking was obviously conditioned by the memory of servility and the desire to find fixity¹². The best example of this is Petronius' *centonarius* Echion who suffers from the double disadvantage of being an ex-slave and a rustic trying to make his fortune in the city (*Sat.* 45-6). He is noted for his profound belief in the city as the framework for social advancement, but this is undone by his lack of social awareness, his vulgar ambitions and his materialism. His social ideas are consequently unrealistic and out of tune with everything around him including the opinions of the more socially experienced freedmen present at Trimalchio's banquet¹³.

Freedmen can be said to have adopted in their ways of self-representation a double perspective, keeping one eye on group identity (the need to assert what made freedmen different from other groups in society) and the other on the community in which they had to conquer a proper place (the desire to be seen as individuals sharing characteristics with other members of the community). In the following I shall discuss a series of connections between freedmen and the divine which illustrate this double identity and the problems which it caused them in their attempts at self-presentation. For the tragic position of the freedman lies in the fact that his servile past could not be eradicated and that his status was of a transitory nature. The obvious starting-point is Petronius' *Cena*, admittedly not an easy source to use, but when one discusses freedmen it is a document which can hardly be bypassed. Here I will discuss some aspects of Trimalchio's views on the interconnectedness of the human and the divine spheres. In the next part I shall attempt to

¹¹ On the image of the freedman in Roman society, cf. Jean Andreau, 'The Freedman', in A. Giardina (ed.), *The Romans*, Chicago 1993, 175-98.

¹² This side of the *Cena* is expertly discussed by John Bodel, *Freedmen in the "Satyricon" of Petronius*, diss. Michigan 1984.

¹³ Cf. my discussion of Echion's social thinking in 'The Social Dimensions of Gladiatorial Combat in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*', in H. Hofmann/M. Zimmermann (eds.), *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel*, vol. 9, Groningen 1998, 75-97.

tease out certain social issues from a selection of inscriptions concerned with the most prominent group of freedmen, the Augustales.

DIVINE ASSOCIATIONS

When Encolpius and his friends enter the labyrinthine house of their host they are immediately confronted with a series of paintings which portray Trimalchio's career from a young slave to a successful freedman¹⁴. Three deities have been included in the storyline (*Sat.* 29, 3-7). Minerva escorts Trimalchio on his entry into Rome and supervises his training in accounting. Mercury is lifting him up by the chin and places him onto a lofty dais. The goddess Fortuna, holding her horn of plenty, makes her appearance in one of the final panels. It is clear that in this official version Trimalchio's social and commercial success is attributed exclusively to divine assistance. His talent in accounting, supervised by Minerva, ensured him a prominent position in his master's household, while Mercury watched over his commercial success, an area in which Fortuna was also an active agent.

It is striking to note, however, how this pictorial storyline differs from the oral account of his career which Trimalchio delivers in chapters 75-6. Here there is no mention of the training which he received and no reference is made to the position of *dispensator* which he held in his master's household. According to Trimalchio's version addressed to his dinner-guests, the route to success started with the sexual favours which he bestowed on his master and mistress. The position of most favoured slave assured him of the inheritance of a senatorial fortune upon his master's death. Then he began to invest in commerce and trade. The first time all of Trimalchio's ships went down in a violent storm making him lose 30 million sesterces in the process (76, 4-5). But he persevered and built a second fleet. Trimalchio's wife Fortunata assisted him by selling off all her jewellery and all of her clothes and put a hundred gold pieces in his hand. The gesture was surely only of symbolic importance, but Trimalchio makes it look like it made a vital difference: 'hoc fuit peculii mei fermentum' (76, 7). I believe this passage has a certain significance which links it with the mural representation of Trimalchio's career. The significance lies in the fact that a woman named Fortunata takes on the role which in the non-verbal representation had been awarded to the goddess Fortuna. A human has taken the place of a divine force. There is a further instance of the said peculiarity in the same passage when Trimalchio recounts that at some point he wanted

¹⁴ John Bodé, 'Trimalchio's Underworld', in James Tatum (ed.), *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, Baltimore 1994, 237-60; Jean-Christian Dumont, 'Le décor de Trimalcion', *MEFRA* 102. 2 (1990), 959-81.

to retire from business but was dissuaded from doing so on the advice of an astrologer named Serapa, whom, Trimalchio asserts, also the gods consult (76, 10)¹⁵. The latter remark points up another interesting aspect of Trimalchio's address on his career. The order of human and divine forces in Trimalchio's universe is sometimes strangely reversed, so that there arises a lack of fixed understanding of who is responsible for the freedman's success, himself, other human beings who receive divine-like status, or the gods¹⁶. On two occasions Trimalchio states that his success is to be attributed to his own merits and abilities (75, 8; 75, 10), yet his position as the sexual favourite in his master's household is attributed to the will of the gods (76, 1: 'quemadmodum di volent'). The latter point is of course nothing more than a discrete disclaimer of his own checkered past, but that he ascribes his sexual exploitation to divine intervention is indicative of his tendency to confuse the two spheres.

One possible response to the confusion created by these passages is to view Trimalchio himself as an individual with divine pretensions. This is first of all made clear in the pictorial version of his career when Trimalchio, in the process of being escorted by Minerva, is holding a staff, the *caduceus*, an attribute of Mercury. The freedman is thus not only assisted by Mercury, in a sense he has himself become Mercury. This idea of personal divinity is illustrated in a number of other passages from the *Cena*. The hosts's abode is associated with practices which allow us to identify it as a temple. The dining-room, the central part of Trimalchio's architecture, and, as it were, of his life-style and personality, is to be entered right foot first (30, 6), as if the guests were visiting a temple (Vitr. 3, 3). Even more revealing is the host's own opinion about his living conditions and how these were transformed by his success: originally the place was a dump, 'nunc est templum' (77,4). Towards the end of the banquet slaves dressed up as household gods (with tunics girded up) bring in statuettes of Trimalchio's *Lares* - named Gain, Luck, and Profit - and a statuette representing the host himself, perhaps in the guise of the Genius of the household (60, 8-9). The guests offer obeisance by kissing the feet of Trimalchio's representation in bronze¹⁷. Once again

¹⁵ The importance of personal names to signify this interchange between human and divine spheres has, as far as I am aware, not received scholarly attention. Stefano Priuli, *Ascyllus: note di onomastica petroniana*, Brussels 1975, has some useful material on the significance of names in Petronius, but he has not analysed the two passages I am discussing here.

¹⁶ There is deliberate irony in the fact that Trimalchio's address on his career is preceded by Habinnas' remark 'homines sumus, non dei' (75, 1), which makes Trimalchio an outsider among his entourage of freedmen.

¹⁷ Cf. for this episode John F. Miller, 'A Travesty of Ritual in Petronius ('Satyricon' 60)', *Hermes* 117 (1989), 192-204; Marco Grondona, *La religione e la superstizione nella Cena Trimalchionis*, Brussels 1980, 85-8; H. Petersmann, 'Religion, Superstition and Parody in Petronius' 'Cena Trimalchionis', in H. Hofmann (ed.), *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel*, vol. 6, Groningen 1995, 75-87, esp. 82-3.

the impression is created that the freedman has reached divine status and once again there is an obvious reminder that it was wealth made from business which validated this claim.

In a stimulating essay on the mural paintings of Trimalchio's house John Bodel has pointed out that an association of individuals with deities occurs most frequently in reliefs on tombstones; they are never found in a domestic context. According to Bodel, this form of geographical displacement stresses the underlying trend in the *Cena* that Trimalchio's life should really be understood as death¹⁸. Of signal importance here is Bodel's argument that the decorations of the house, the physical surroundings more than the words uttered in them, reveals Petronius' social views on freedmen. In the Petronian cosmology Trimalchio's ostentatious life-style is an hyperbolic image of the futile existence of the rich freedman. For all his wealth, Trimalchio cannot entertain long-term social goals, for the freedman is an individual existing for a single generation. Consequently, everything Trimalchio does resembles running around in circles. All he can do with his enormous fortune is to engage in a never-ending cycle of accumulation and consumption, literally eating away his capital while it is constantly being added to. Bodel further pointed out that the majority of individuals who decided to represent themselves on their tombstones in divine form were freedmen. Here we may have an interesting insight into freedman mentality, an area where fiction meets real life. There must have been specific reasons why freedmen were attracted to this form of self-presentation, and with much greater frequency than other groups in society.

The German scholar Henning Wrede has devoted an entire study to this phenomenon and he has arrived at some interesting, albeit controversial, conclusions¹⁹. It is worth noting that these representations are entirely self-absorbing; the focus is on husband and wife and their children and the divine associations may be said to stand for the virtues and the rate of success achieved by individuals in activities deemed unrespectable by the aristocracy. Wrede, however, goes much further than this by positing that the fashion started with the freedmen of the emperor who used this symbolic language to show their loyalty to the imperial house²⁰. He furthermore suggests that the emperors deliberately favoured the spread of this code of personal deification in order to undermine the old republican code of ancestral images on which the aristocracy relied. This part of Wrede's explanation is unduly speculative and I am particularly unconvinced by his emphasis on the

¹⁸ Bodel (above note 14), 242; 246-51.

¹⁹ Henning Wrede, *Consecratio in formam deorum: Vergöttlichte Privatpersonen in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz 1981, esp. 93-105.

²⁰ Wrede (above note 19), 102.

factor of loyalty towards the emperor. If this were true, one would expect to find more signs of it. Wrede's argument that Mercury was a popular choice because this god had not been prominent in imperial imagery since Augustus and thus was a safe bet by and large ignores the freedman's attachment to personal success gained in commercial affairs.

Returning to to the scene where Trimalchio introduces his household gods, it has been perceptively observed that they bear names which have also been attested for slaves²¹. In his study of personal divinity Wrede pointed out, independently of the passage in Petronius, that in the first century AD it became fashionable for slaves to be given names of deities. It is not impossible that Petronius was acquainted with this trend and used it to highlight Trimalchio's servile mind-set: his personal gods are slaves. A freedman with *Lares* is of course a serious anomaly since by their very position as ex-slaves freedmen had no ancestors. In Roman literature freedmen are often characterized as 'ex se natus'²², a noted disqualification in a society where esteem was traditionally built on ancestral reputation. In contrast, in the *Cena* the freedman Hermeros invents a pre-servile regal past, claims that his fate as a slave was purely voluntary, and deems the life of a slave to be superior to that of a freeborn person in terms of moral fibre (57, 4; 57, 10-11). This attempt to undermine one of the dominant social codes in the Roman world may have appeared comical to Petronius' audience, but modern scholars should distance themselves from such a response and not allow themselves to be fooled into thinking that Hermeros' reaction is a fabrication which merely serves to raise a laugh. His angry response to Ascyllus' condescending attitude lays bare the freedman's problems of constructing an identity. Hermeros reinvents his past and reverses the traditional evaluation of slavery and in so doing he is able to reevaluate his position as a freedman: 'et nunc spero me sic vivere, ut nemini iocus sim. homo inter homines sum, capite aperto ambulo' (57, 4-5). It is significant that he does so by changing his past identities, knowingly demonstrating that his present identity (that of a freedman) has no substance. Against this background, how are we supposed to read the divine associations which Trimalchio and other, historical, freedmen have appropriated for themselves? As the phenomenon largely occurs among freedmen and freeborn individuals of low social status, it is possible that it was part of a strategy to construct a separate identity, perhaps maintained in opposition to upper-class ideologies. As the patron god of trade and commerce, usually portrayed with a bag of coins, Mercury was associated with a line of activities which lacked respectability in the eyes of the upper classes. In the novel, by presenting

²¹ Cf. Martin S. Smith (ed.), *Petronius: Cena Trimalchionis*, Oxford 1982, 169.

²² Tacitus, *Ann.*, 11, 21, 3; Cicero, *Phil.* 6, 17; cf. Bodel (above note 14), 245.

himself as Mercury Trimalchio unwittingly removes himself from the aristocratic life-style which he adopts elsewhere. In the case of the historical freedmen, there is no sign of conflicting images and we may imagine that they were proud of their separate identity.

UPWARDLY MOBILE CULTS

Epigraphy provides the most extensive record of religious activities undertaken by freedmen and in the Roman world. It offers the advantage of a direct, unscreened, reflection of religious behaviour. But how reliable a guide is epigraphy? We should make explicit the limitations of our material before we can draw any meaningful conclusion from it. It should be understood that each individual text that has come down to us is the result of chance survival and can bring us up to date with only a fragment of religious activities. The choice of a deity would then appear less meaningful than was initially surmised. We do not know from which range of deities the selection was made and we have very little or no information as to which other deities the individual might have turned to, but for which no record has been preserved. As far as the first point is concerned, we should emphasise that in local communities not all deities were represented and that therefore the deities that were available may have acquired a multi-purpose or all-purpose character. To us the Roman religious universe may appear as a well-oiled machine with specialised functions for different deities, and, one may perhaps add, with specific cultural meanings attached to them. This impression is mainly based on our advantage of having a full overview of the pantheon, something which most ancient worshippers and especially those with only local or regional ties may not have had.

How do we then decide on what is significant behaviour? The epigraphic record clearly shows that freedmen were not excluded from participation in any cult, with the noted exception of the state priesthoods which were reserved for members of the senate. There is also no cult which is completely dominated by individuals of servile descent. There is, therefore, no reason to read something socially significant in, for example, a freedman donating money to build a temple to Diana. We are likely to discover a more rewarding area of investigation by focussing on specific cults in which an abstract value is celebrated, more particularly concepts which serve to make the freedman part of a wider community. In other words, we have to focus on upwardly mobile cults, cults which, because of their high ranking in the community, may have served as the vehicle to reach a higher stage of social respectability. To be able to do this with a reasonable degree of success we have to take into consideration the general limitations of the freedman's position in society and the social ramifications of his religious involvement, for himself, his family, and for the image of the social group to which he

belonged. Of course, a perfect match between social self-presentation and religious behaviour will not be established easily. All we can do is to offer suggestions as to how this nexus may have worked to the freedman's advantage. In what follows I shall discuss two examples of such cults.

The origins of the Augustales have been a hotly debated issue. Most of the attention has focussed on the question whether or not Augustus was personally involved in their establishment. It seems best to follow Steven Ostrow's sensible view that if Augustus did not take the initiative himself, something for which there is no evidence, he must have been aware of its development and did not withhold his permission. The function of the imperial cult was too important to allow it to evolve on its own and to move in a direction which did not satisfy the emperor or his advisers. The reasons for involving mainly freedmen in the newly established cult are essentially unknowable, although some cogent possibilities have been suggested by Ostrow. In his most recent essay on the subject he links the establishment of the imperial priesthood with several other developments of Augustus' reign, such as the restructuring of the upper classes, the strict supervision of manumission, the stabilising of urban areas and the establishment of the imperial cult²³. First of all, Ostrow points out that in social terms the Augustales became a *seminarium* for the municipal elite, thus giving their sons the opportunity to become members of the local council. In a sense they served the same role that the equestrian order performed vis-à-vis the senate. Secondly, by allowing a selected group of freedmen to reach a position of prominence the element of competition which this implies calls to mind the system of bonuses which formed the basis for the new rules of manumission. The establishment of the Augustales, thirdly, opened up an avenue for achieving respectability and the promise of further social advancement defused the possibility of social discontent, which, Ostrow argues, the Augustan regime had to face in the 30's and 20's BC. Fourthly, allowing freedmen to play the most prominent role in the newly established cult, still according to Ostrow, offered them a fixed place in society and the possibility to make sense of their new world, 'including their own relationship to the emperor'.

Although specific details on the requirements for membership of the Augustales have not come down to us, there can be no doubt that wealth must have been the most important criterion. One may furthermore assume that some sort of selection procedure was applied, perhaps in connection with moral qualities, since a substantial number

²³ Cf. S. E. Ostrow, 'The Augustales in the Augustan Scheme', in Kurt A. Raaflaub/Mark Toher (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1990, 364-80.

of inscriptions mentions the fact that the local municipal council had given permission for a candidate to become a priest of the imperial cult. Their religious activities can be followed at close range through a substantial number of inscriptions. The Augustales were responsible for celebrating the birthdays of individual emperors and other members of the imperial house. Their role as priests also allowed them to act as civic benefactors. During his spell as an Augustalis Trimalchio chose to distribute money to his fellow-citizens (71, 9). However, other evidence suggests that Augustales were subject to a specific set of civic obligations (*munera*). The areas mentioned with greatest frequency are games (*ludi*) and road construction. The latter activity was a very costly affair which did not earn much prestige. This must be the reason why in some inscriptions a number of Augustales pooled their resources²⁴. However, the situation probably varied from city to city and soon after their establishment we see Augustales branch out into other areas. The most popular form was the dedication of a statue of the emperor, usually followed by a banquet or a distribution of money to which the most prominent social groups in the community were invited. From the middle of the first century AD we see Augustales (and freedmen in general) offer gladiatorial shows to their communities, most likely as the result of their involvement with the imperial cult.

In this respect it is difficult to draw a distinction between the Augustales and members of the municipal council, a fact which may have contributed to their full integration. Veyne is surely right in viewing Trimalchio's act of distributing money to the community as a significant indication of the enhanced status of the Augustales and of Trimalchio himself. A pompous fool though he may be, this single act of generosity established him as a member of the restricted group of citizens who engaged zealously in the pursuit of doing well, marking him off from those who had no other option but to queue up to receive a donation²⁵. This must have been one of the most important benefits achieved by a freedman: the opportunity to prove himself as a citizen. For someone who was frequently of foreign extraction and therefore without roots in the local community, the status of a benefactor must have been a high priority. I am not too sure whether Ostrow's explanation, borrowed from Simon Price's pertinent discussion of the imperial cult in the East, that the fact of being a priest of the imperial cult alone allowed freedmen a certain degree of fixedness in society. Is it really true that the highlighting of the Augustales' personal relationship to the emperor is a meaningful way of commenting on their social position? The

²⁴ *CIL* IX, 808 (Luceria): two; *CIL* XI, 6126 (Forum Sempronii): twelve, of whom two are freeborn; *CIL* XI, 6127 (Forum Sempronii): three; *CIL* XI, 3803 (Falerii): four.

²⁵ Paul Veyne, 'Vie de Trimalcion', in idem, *La société romaine*, Paris 1991, 49.

ramifications of the freedman's involvement in the imperial cult have to sought in a different social context.

So much at least is suggested by an inscription from Misenum which records a benefaction from one of the Augustales towards the guild. In the year AD 102 Tullius Eutyclus made a donation of 30,000 sesterces to the treasury of the Augustales so that the interest generated by the capital could be used for an annual distribution to the members of the guild. This is a standard arrangement which we encounter in many other inscriptions from the Roman West, but this text presents one extraordinary characteristic which makes it different from the other arrangements made by individual benefactors. The money is to be distributed not on the birthday of the benefactor, nor is there a connection with the anniversary of a death in his family. The distribution is to take place on the day which commemorates the foundation of the city of Misenum: 'cum Tullius Eutyclus largissima voluntate sua rem communem n. locupletaverit offerendo arcae n. HS XXX m. n. cuius summae reditum quod annis pr. Idus Iunias natale municipii corpori nostro viritim divisio fiat' etc. It is clear that the beneficiaries are going to be the Augustales ('corpori nostro viritim divisio fiat'), but it is also evident that the occasion is specifically designed to tie in with the public celebration of the most important local holiday²⁶.

This emphasis on their position as valued members of the community neatly corresponds with another religious phenomenon, that of dedications made by individual benefactors to the Genius of the *municipium* or the *colonia*. This area of public religion has not received much scholarly attention and I am in no position to claim that the sample that I have collected is exhaustive. However, it is striking to note that the majority of dedications are from those of servile descent. In fact, Augustales form the majority of those who set up altars or statues or who erected and restored temples of this cult²⁷. A text from Saepinum records the dedication of a statue of the *Genius municipii Saepinatium* by C. Neratius C. l. Epinius 'ob honorem Augustalitat'is' (*CIL IX*, 2440). In neighbouring Aesernia L. Albanus Martialis, a *sexvir Augustalis* twice and a *quinquennialis* of the association is at the same time honoured as

²⁶ The text can be found in Alfonso de Franciscis, *Il sacello degli Augustali a Miseno*, Naples 1991, 22=AE 1993, 468.

²⁷ Examples of freedmen involved in the cult are: *CIL XIV*, 9 (Ostia); *CIL V*, 4212 (Brixia); *CIL X*, 1565; 1567; 1568 (Puteoli); *CIL IX*, 1418; 1544 (Beneventum); AE 1984, 485 (Emerita); AE 1985, 354 (Ricina); AE 1981, 342 (Heba); *CIL X*, 722 (Stabiae); *CIL XII*, 1159 (Carpentorate); AE 1934, 234 (Aquileia); AE 1993, 474 (Misenum); AE 1994, 1163 (Arles). Dedications by magistrates are also known: AE 1995, 892 (Labitolosa; conv. Caesaraug.); *CIL X*, 1236 (Nola); AE 1935, 40 (Thagora); AE 1941, 46 (Thamugadi); AE 1955, 245 (Tarraco); AE 1976, 140 (Puteoli); AE 1964, 251 (Adamklissi); AE 1982, 520 (Italica).

patron of the worshippers of the *Genius municipii* (*CIL IX*, 2678). A final example comes from Interamna where Faustus Titius Liberalis who has been a *sevir Augustalis* for the second time was responsible for three dedications. The first one was to the *Salus Perpetua Augusta* and the *Libertas publica* of the Roman people; the second to the *Genius* of the *municipium*; the third was a dedication to the *Providentia* of Tiberius Caesar Augustus (*CIL XI*, 4170). Thus it may be assumed that through their involvement in the imperial cult the Augustales expressed a keen interest in furthering their position within the local community. In my view this can only be explained from their lack of roots. Their servile past produced a fervent desire to display a sense of loyalty and commitment to the communities which had accepted them as citizens. The highest mark of respect was bestowed on an Augustalis from Caes. After he had communicated to the local council his decision to stage a gladiatorial show at his own expense he was honoured in a lengthy decree which praised his *amor patriae*²⁸.

CONCLUSIONS

I have discussed two religious phenomena in connection with Roman freedmen which may contain elements of their underlying social philosophy. We have noticed that both in literature and in iconography some freedmen had a strong urge to associate themselves with divinity or to present themselves with divine attributes. This is of course a complex phenomenon which needs careful interpretation, but it may be presumed, that there is a strong connection with the psychology of the freedman. It is conceivable that this idea of secular divinity originated from a desire on the part of some freedmen to develop an ideology of their own. The gods with whom they associate themselves can frequently be linked directly to a line of activity in which they had achieved major success. The idea itself was of course not a completely new one, nor was it invented by freedmen. The desire for human deification can already be found for instance in the first century BC when the great political leaders minted coins with deities on them carrying their own features²⁹. It may further be surmised that the upper classes relinquished this practice once the Principate was established and human association with the gods became the reserve of the Princeps and his family. It was

²⁸ *CIL X*, 4643; in *AE 1888*, 126, an imperial freedman is praised for his 'liberalitas' and for his 'amor erga patriam'; cf. *CIL X*, 5917: 'erga amorem patriae et civium' in an inscription for another imperial freedman.

²⁹ For a pertinent discussion of this phenomenon cf. J. Pollini, 'Man or God: Divine Assimilation and Imitation in the Late Republic and Early principate', in Kurt A. Raaflaub/Mark Toher (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1990, 334-64.

subsequently adopted by some freedmen who brought it in line with their own social codes.

In the second set of evidence we looked at the involvement of freedmen on the level of the local community. Their involvement with the imperial cult which was firmly entrenched in each town enabled the most wealthy of the freedmen to prove that they were worthy citizens. The privileged status of the Augustales in the communities of the West can easily be surmised from inscriptions which establish the ranking of social groups in *sportulae*. In these texts the Augustales are ranked second after the members of the municipal council, but ahead of professional guilds and the majority of the citizens. The priesthood of the imperial cult allowed freedmen to adopt the social code of doing well, involving them in a range of benefactions which, in their nature if not in the height of the outlay, show no significant differences from those performed by members of the local or imperial elite. The centre of their attention, therefore, was not necessarily, or even primarily, the political framework of the Empire, providing, so it has been argued, a direct link with the emperor and the imperial house. It may be suggested that their major frame of reference was their position within the local community. Their entrenchment in the imperial cult was used to prove their willingness to become actively involved in the construction of local amenities and the providing of entertainment. This sentiment of loyalty and commitment undoubtedly stemmed from their lack of fixedness brought about by their former servile background.